



THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF BAGHESH/BITLIS AND TARON/MUSH

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In the vicinity of Lake Van lie some of the most important cultural centers of medieval Armenia: the region of Vaspurakan to the east, Mekk to the south, and the island of Aghtamar, the home of the eponymous Church of the Holy Cross (Surb Khach). No less significant is the region west of Van, the district of Taron, including Mush and the city of Bitlis. Even a brief overview reveals a rich artistic tradition in the region already in the tenth century, which continued to flourish well into the era of Ottoman rule. Domed, centrally-planned churches, elaborate monumental sculpture, *khachkars*, and numerous illuminated manuscripts all find their origins west of Lake Van.

Before considering the material, however, a short history of the area is necessary.¹ The ancient district of Taron was an important center as early as the Urartian era and came into the possession of an Armenian priestly clan in the pre-Christian period. In the fourth century, Taron became the locus of conflicts between Christian forces and pagan elements, the former of which prevailed. After centuries of Mamikonian rule, the region passed into the hands of a branch of the Bagratuni house in the eighth

¹ For a historical overview and bibliography for Bitlis, see *Armenian Architecture: A Documented Photo-Archival Collection on Microfiche for the Study of Armenian Architecture*, a multi-volume microfiche collection of Armenian monuments (Zug, Switzerland: Inter Documentation, 1980-1990). The set, which is available in many American research libraries, was created under the direction of Vasken Parsegian, with a foreword by Oleg Grabar, and edited and written by Krikor Maksoudian and Lucy Der Manuelian. For the area of Taron, see vol. 6, fiches A-2023 to A-2033. Hereafter, specific references to *Armenian Architecture* will be indicated by microfiche number.

century and formed a separate principality, maintaining relations with both the Islamic Caliphate and Byzantium, although the two powers struggled to control it during the following three centuries.

Close to the southwestern shores of Lake Van is the fortified city of Bitlis, medieval Baghesh. Located in a mountainous area on the Dzoray Pass, Bitlis held strategic military importance from the early middle ages to the Ottoman period, and functioned as a commercial, religious, and cultural center from the tenth century to the early twentieth century.

The level of artistic production in Bitlis and Mush seems to run in tandem with the tides of political stability. Periods of poaching and raiding, particularly during the Ottoman era, as well as violent earthquakes have damaged or destroyed many of the churches and their treasures. Nevertheless, more than seventy-five monuments still remain.² Of them, one group displays characteristics of seventh- and tenth-century Armenian architecture; a later group testifies to rich cultural exchange with the neighboring empire of Islam.

Architecture

Most prominent among the ecclesiastical foundations of Mush is the Monastery of Surb Arakelots, the Holy Apostles (Figs. 1-2).³ According to late medieval tradition, the church was established by Saint Gregory the Illuminator, who, it is told, founded the site to house relics of Saints Peter and Paul and the Apostle Andrew. More substantial evidence argues, however, for a foundation in connection with the rise of the Tornikian branch of the Mamikonians in the latter half of the eleventh century, the era to which most scholars date the earliest portions of the structure. In the following centuries, clerics of Surb Arakelots forged ties with

² Main sources used here include *Armenian Architecture*; Jean-Michel Thierry, "Monastères arméniens du Vaspurakan," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 8 (1971): 215-27, and n.s., 9 (1972): 137-77. See also Nerses Akinian, *Bagheshi dprotse, 1500-1704* [The School of Baghesh, 1500-1704] (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1952).

³ For bibliography and a detailed history of the monument, see *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2033, A5, pp. 1ff; and Jean-Michel Thierry, "Le couvent des Saints-Apôtres de Muš," *Handes Amsorya* 90 (1976): cols. 235-56.

monasteries in Gladzor and Cilicia, participated in religious councils of national importance, and held within their scriptorium the largest surviving medieval Armenian Gospel, the *Homiliarium* of Mush (Fig. 3).

The atrocities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as at least one serious earthquake, have damaged the physical structure of the monastery (Fig. 4). However, enough remains to reconstruct its original state. The ensemble consists of a main church with two chapels, a narthex (*zhamatun*), and a belltower.⁴

The main church was constructed of brick and mortar, possibly as early as the tenth century.⁵ Dedicated to the Holy Apostles, it consists of an inscribed quatrefoil masked on the exterior by a massive rectangle. Barrel vaults top each of the four arms of the interior, as well as the corner chapels, which are two-storied at both east and west. A dome on squinches, now collapsed, once rested on an octagonal drum above the structure's central bay.⁶ Interior decoration included wall painting, and in the apse one can still discern human figures, most likely representing apostles.

Flanking the south side of the main church is the small chapel of Surb Stepanos, dated by inscription to 1663, and composed of a single aisle terminating in an apse. It is now half-buried in rubble.⁷ Also demolished is the monastery's *zhamatun*, built in 1555. However, the remains suggest that it conformed to the building type usual for the *zhamatun*: a square chamber with four, freestanding piers supporting a small dome or vault. A belltower, dating to 1791, stands at the western wall of the *zhamatun* and survives at present only at its lowest floor.

Some 300 meters (984 feet) to the northeast of the main complex is the chapel of Surb Taddeos, second to the church,

⁴ According to Thierry, the main church and chapels were still in a reasonably good state in 1960. Soon thereafter, however, they were reportedly dynamited by an official from Mush. Today the main complex is almost completely destroyed.

⁵ This assertion is based on Thierry's analysis of the architectural type, the remains of the painting program, and masonry. See Thierry, "Le couvent des Saints-Apôtres," p. 245.

⁶ The dome was restored in 1663.

⁷ This chapel is believed to stand on the ruins of a previous church destroyed by Timur. See *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2033, A10, p. 10.

probably the oldest structure in the complex. Unlike the zhamatun, built of poorly-hewn and joined stone, the small chapel is constructed of tufa and stands in a fair state of preservation. The cruciform interior, masked by a rectangular exterior, features a dome on squinches above the central bay. Interestingly, the squinches are executed with stalactite motifs similar to those found in Seljuk architecture. Relief sculpture ornaments the exterior of the drum and includes vegetal forms, crosses, and lions (Figs. 5-7). Based on stylistic affinities, Jean-Michel Thierry has tentatively suggested a date for the chapel between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁸

Another important monastery in the Mush area is Surb Karapet (Saint John the Precursor), one of the richest institutions in Ottoman Armenia at the start of the twentieth century. While local tradition attributes its founding to Gregory the Illuminator,⁹ it is most probably connected with the rise of the monastic movement in Bagratuni Armenia in the 940s. From the eleventh century until the devastating raids of Timur (Tamerlane) in the fourteenth century, the monastery was a cultural center, as the accounts of Grigor Magistros and Aristakes Lastiverttsi testify.¹⁰ Local tradition recounts that several important political figures, including Tornik Mamikonian, the lord of Sasun, are buried there.

The monastery remained an important center of religion and culture during the Ottoman era. In the eighteenth century, Surb Karapet was home to two future Armenian patriarchs: Hovhannes Kolot (Golod), Patriarch of Constantinople, and Grigor Shghtayakir, Patriarch of Jerusalem.¹¹ In the following century, Mkrtich Khrimian became the prelate of Taron and established at the monastery a printing press, a school, and a journal. In the early years of the twentieth century, Surb Karapet hosted thousands of pilgrims from Russia, Persia, and various provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and the revenues and gifts accrued kept the

⁸ Thierry, "Le couvent des Saints-Apôtres," p. 251.

⁹ See the discussion of sources in *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2106, A1-2, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ Ibid., vol. 6, A-2106, A3, p. 3.

¹¹ In 1709, a very severe earthquake caused major damage at the monastery, and both Hovhannes and Grigor undertook the task of having the affected structures renovated.

monastery prosperous until its destruction in 1915-16. Fortunately, the most significant of the monastery's treasures were not discovered and plundered, and they were subsequently transported to the Holy See of Echmiadzin. Among them is an eighteenth-century reliquary of the right hand of Saint John, made of silver repousée (Fig. 8).¹²

Although now almost completely demolished, the Monastery of Surb Karapet once included a number of building complexes, of which the main group is the oldest and most interesting for our discussion (Figs. 9-11).¹³ Surrounded by a circuit wall, it is actually a single structure which houses several churches and chapels. Accessed at the west through the first floor of an eighteenth-century belltower, one enters the main church, which is dedicated to the Holy Cross (Surb Khach). A spacious square chamber, the church is screened by a forest of columns, sixteen in all, which once supported diaphragm arches for stone vaulting. At the east lies a small apse which houses the altar.

As has been previously pointed out, the main church is not at all characteristic of ecclesiastical architecture in Armenia.¹⁴ With its large square shape, abundance of columns, and location to the west of the other chapels of the complex, the Church of the Holy Cross is much closer in type to a zhamatun. Furthermore, the church floor is lined with numerous graves (including, it is believed, that of Tornik Mamikonian). As Krikor Maksoudian has pointed out, Armenian canons prohibit burial within sanctuaries.¹⁵ There is thus little doubt that the area originally functioned as a zhamatun.

The church communicates with all the chapels to its east, including, from the north, Surb Astvatsatsin, Surb Stepanos, Surb Karapet, and Surb Gevorg. The two central churches, those of

¹² When the Russian troops occupied Mush in 1916, the Catholicos arranged for the treasures to be brought to Echmiadzin. For an image of the reliquary, see Jean-Michel Thierry and Patrick Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens* (Paris: Éditions Mazenod, 1987), p. 445, fig. 530.

¹³ See also Thomas A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural and Archaeological Survey*, vol. 1 (London: Pindar Press, 1987), pp. 310ff. Sinclair discusses the condition of the site and the extent of its destruction in some detail.

¹⁴ See *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2106, A7, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, A8, p. 8.

Surb Karapet and Surb Stepanos, are domed, with high cylindrical drums and conical roofs. Beyond the main complex lie monks' cells, a refectory, accommodations for pilgrims, and two nineteenth-century structures: the prelacy and monastery school.

Around Bitlis stand several monasteries of historical and cultural importance, including Surb Hizdbuzit of Tukh (Figs. 12-13),¹⁶ Surb Hovhannes of Sorb,¹⁷ Surb Gevorg of Goms (Fig. 14),¹⁸ Surb Tovma of Mrors,¹⁹ and Khumsavank.²⁰ One of the most intriguing is the complex of Goms, which appears to have held a prominent position in the area until Kurdish pressures in the nineteenth century forced its abandonment. As Thierry has noted, the superior of the monastery was, by tradition, also bishop of the surrounding region of Karjkan. The site attracted numerous pilgrims, for local tradition relates that the monastery possessed, among its relics, the head of Saint George.

The walls of the complex enclose the main church and monastic buildings, all of which were still standing in the 1960s. The main church is strikingly homogeneous: unlike most medieval structures, it betrays no evidence of a major restoration. Its rubble masonry, typical of medieval Armenian architecture, appears uniform on exterior and interior. In architectural form, the church is domed and roughly cruciform, its cross arms surmounted by barrel vaulting. At the east stands an apse flanked by two-storied side chapels. The dome, rising above the central bay of the church, is supported on a twelve-sided drum. Creating a transition between the drum and the square central bay are fan-shaped squinches, three in each corner (Fig. 15).

Sculptural decoration enlivens the windows and doors of the church, and particularly interesting are the arched windows of the main walls (Fig. 16). At the west, the arch of the window is constructed with voussoirs (arch stones); directly above it, an addi-

¹⁶ For discussion, see Jean-Michel Thierry, "Monastères arméniens du Vaspurakan," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 9 (1972): 150-53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-64.

¹⁹ Jean-Michel Thierry, "Monastères arméniens du Vaspurakan," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 8 (1971): 376-79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-81. For a detailed description of all these monuments, as well as relevant bibliography, see *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2023.

tional arch occurs in the form of a projecting window profile. This double-arch design, which appears in the tenth century and earlier, has led Thierry to propose a tenth-century date for the church, possibly in connection with the rise of the Artsruni dynasty and its liberation of the region.²¹

Sculpture

Medieval sculpture is also abundant in Taron and Bitlis. Numerous khachkars found in and around the city of Bitlis have been photographed in recent decades by Armen Hakhnazarian and others. Hakhnazarian's photographs document, for example, a number of khachkars near the İhlasiye Medresesi in Bitlis, columnar fragments with cross reliefs, and Armenian inscriptions dating from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (Figs. 17-18).²² The sculpture of this period is distinguished by an elaborate, curvilinear style which finds analogues in Ottoman art. Another group of khachkars, located in the cemetery at Por, near Bitlis, are square in shape and feature large Maltese crosses, the arms of which are bordered with small ring-shaped motifs (Fig. 19).²³

The most spectacular work of medieval Armenian sculpture southwest of Lake Van is the wooden portal originally located at Surb Arakelots in Mush, now held at the Historical Museum in Erevan (Fig. 20). The door consists of a frame and two panels, all of walnut, and features an inscription indicating that it was sculpted by lords Toros, Grigor, and Ghukas in 1134.²⁴ In each

²¹ Space does not permit an examination of the many other monasteries and churches in the regions of Taron and Bitlis. However, one should note at least in passing the following: the Monastery of the Resurrection of Deveboynu, of which the main church features unusual construction of intricate brick vaulting. The Monastery of the Mother of God (Astvatsatsin) at Ilou includes a triconch church that perhaps dates to the tenth century, for, as Thierry notes, a church by the same name in the vicinity is mentioned by Samuel of Ani as constructed at this time. Finally, one must mention the Monastery of Por, or Porayvank, near Bitlis, associated with Gregory of Narek, the tenth-century poet and mystic. Local tradition relates that the original copy of his *Book of Lamentations* was preserved there.

²² See *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2023, A4-B7, pp. 4-7.

²³ See Thierry and Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens*, p. 312, in which the authors discuss the "school" of Por.

²⁴ The title *Ter* has led Garegin Hovsepien to conclude that it was intended to

of the main panels, four octagonal forms are arranged in a vertical row. At the center of each octagon lies an eight-pointed star, which unites the main octagons with sub-patterns of lozenges and criss-cross forms. The overall effect recalls the geometric patterns of lacework, and also suggests contact with Islamic traditions.²⁵

The doorframe is composed of palmette scrolls, or *rinceaux*, inhabited by animal and human figures. Each post features a menagerie of real and fantastic beasts: at the right are a bird with a human head, a large horned animal, an elephant, an animal with intertwined horns, a bull-like creature, a water buffalo, and a monkey with a crown on its head; on the left panel are a doe, donkey, tiger, panther, horse, lion, jackal, and an animal with a sharp beak.

The lintel is the most complex part of the portal, featuring five human figures. At the right, two armed horsemen face each other; one figure pierces a serpent-like dragon with his lance as the other observes. Next to the dragon runs an inscription naming a certain Theodore.²⁶ However, the identity of the figures is by no means clear; they might represent riding saints, as Sirarpie Der Nersessian has suggested, or perhaps patrons of the monastery, as it was common to portray nobles hunting on horseback in medieval Armenia.²⁷ At the left are two more horsemen, riding in full gallop and brandishing lances. A trumpet-blowing angel separates the groups. Although other sculpted wooden portals exist, such as those of Surb Arakelots at Sevan and at the church of Tatev, this example is the earliest, and its geometric style is quite different from the other two, which more closely resemble the sculpture of khachkars.²⁸ The Mush portal thus furnishes precious information on wooden sculpture in medieval Armenia.

preface all three names and that all were bishops. See *Armenian Architecture*, vol. 6, A-2033, B1, p. 1. It should be mentioned that Thierry and Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens*, p. 559, suspect the portal is a montage of pieces by different hands. This opinion has not gained general approval.

²⁵ One thinks of decorated wooden minbars, such as the ninth-century example at the mosque of Kairouan, which also features such geometric motifs.

²⁶ The majority of inscriptions accompanying these figures are not legible; only the name Theodore at the side of the dragon can be deciphered with certainty.

²⁷ Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *L'art arménien* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 205.

²⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 1. Monastery of Surb Arakelots (Oskian)

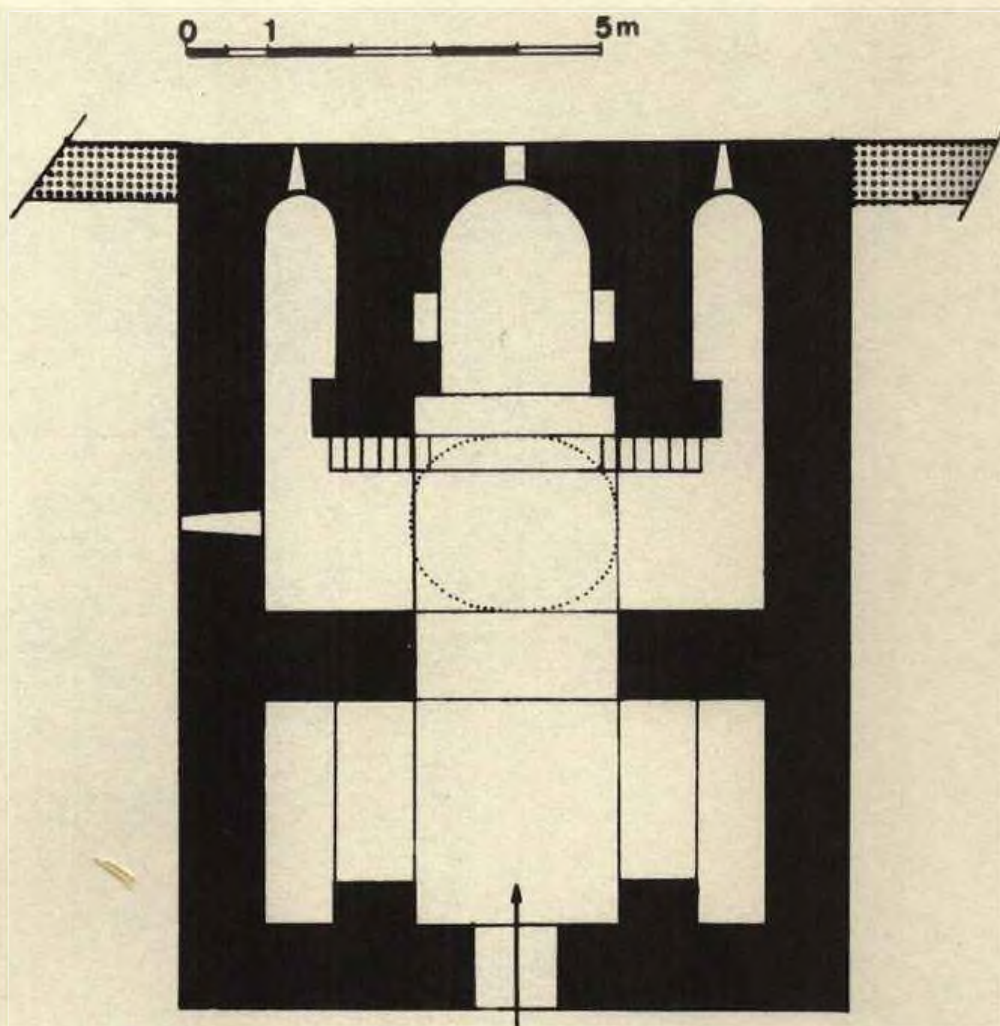


Fig. 2. Surb Arakelots: Ground Plan (Thierry, "Saints-Apôtres")



Fig. 3. *Homiliarium* of Mush, 1200-1202 A.D. (Kévorkian and Mahé)



Fig. 4. Surb Arakelots in Ruins (*Armenian Architecture*: Hakhnazarian)



Figs. 5-6. Surb Arakelots: Chapel of Surb Taddeos (Thierry, "Saints-Apôtres")

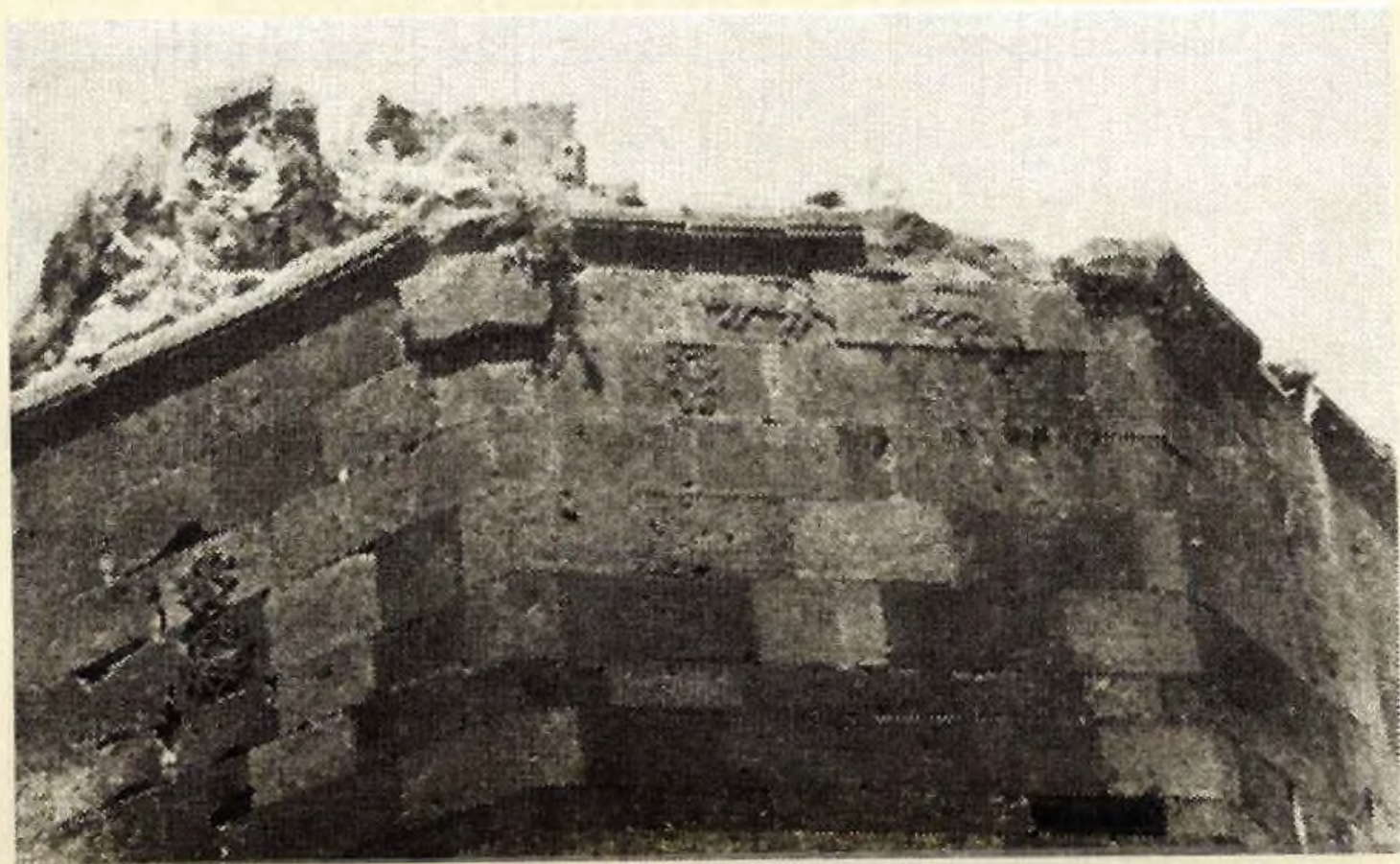


Fig. 7. Surb Arakelots: Chapel of Surb Taddeos (Thierry, "Saints-Apôtres")

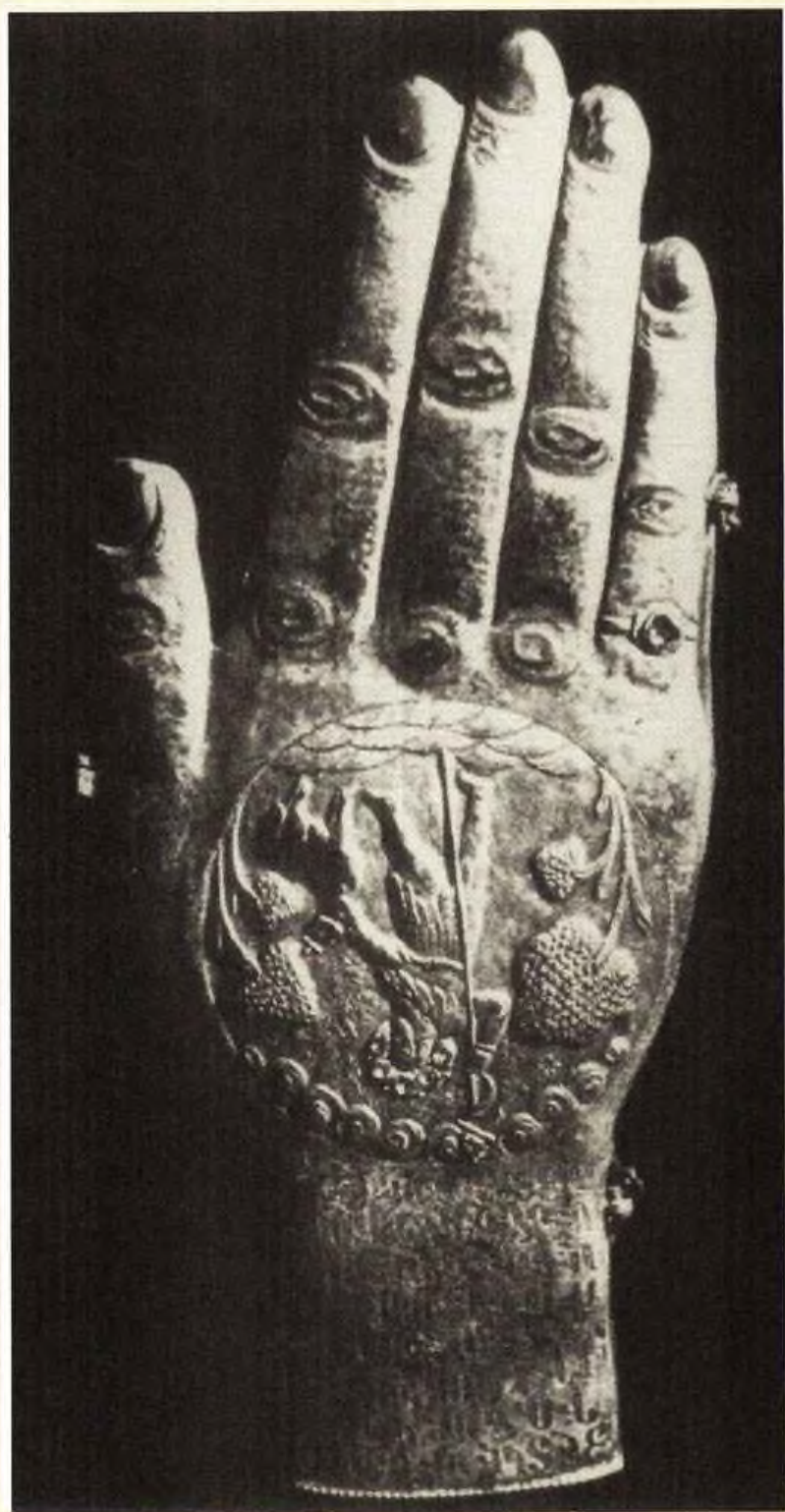


Fig. 8. Reliquary of Saint John (Thierry and Donabédian)



Fig. 9. Monastery of Surb Karapet: General View

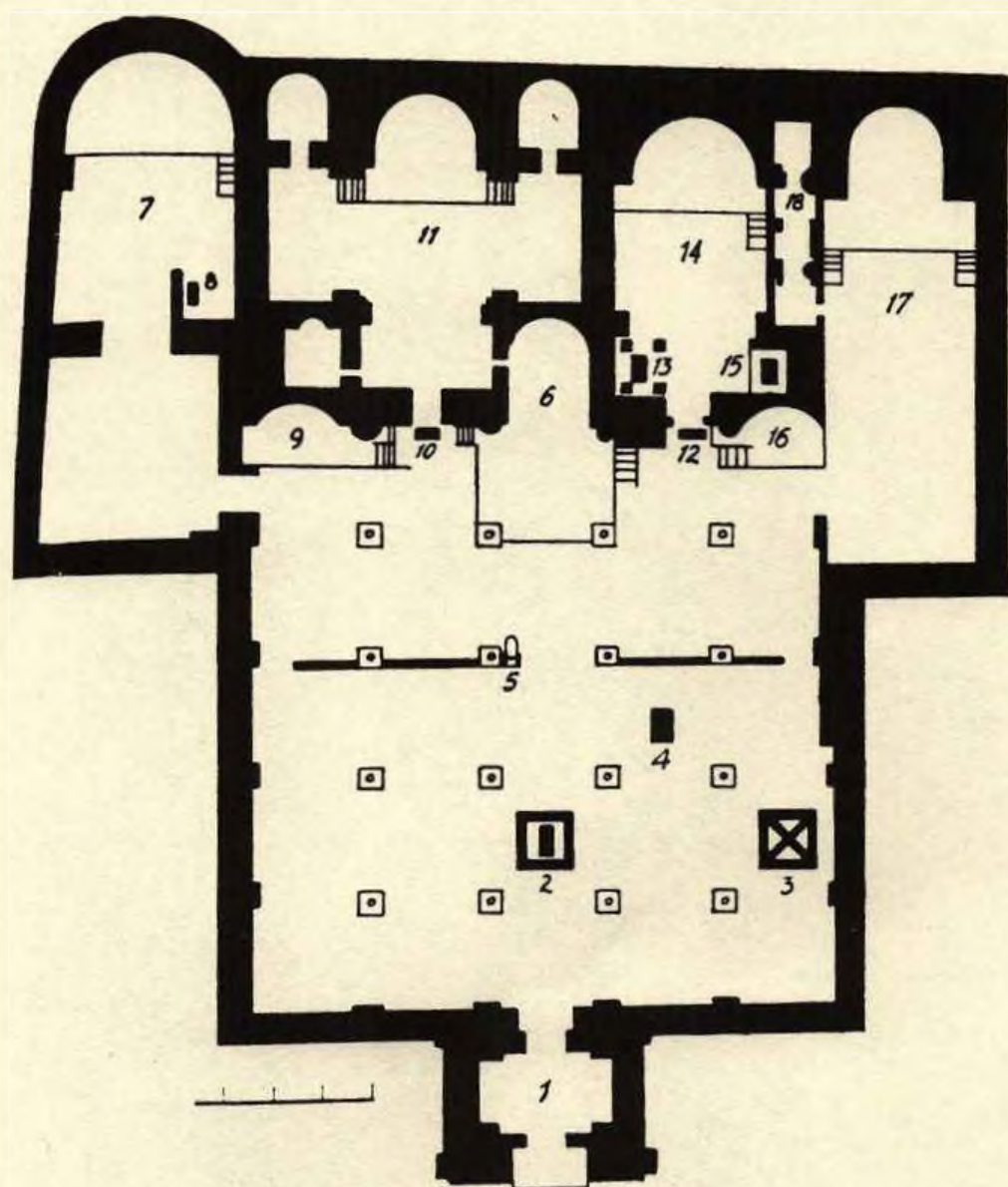
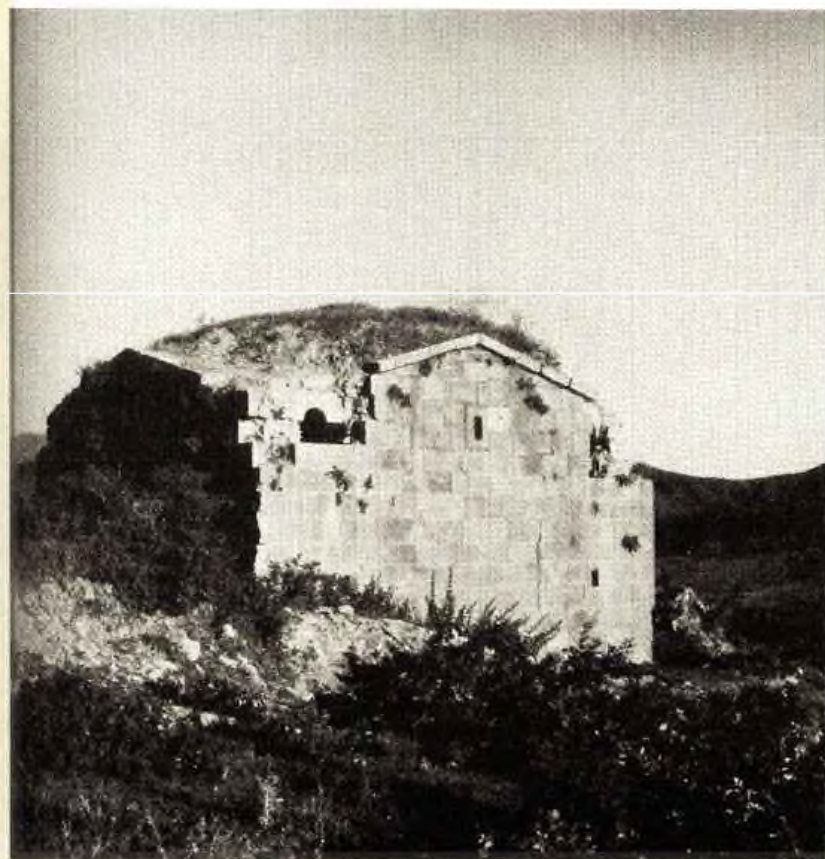


Fig. 10. Surb Karapet: Ground Plan (Oskian)



Fig. 11. Surb Karapet in Ruins (*Armenian Architecture*: Bruchhaus)



Figs. 12-13. Surb Hizdbuzit (Thierry, "Vaspurakan")

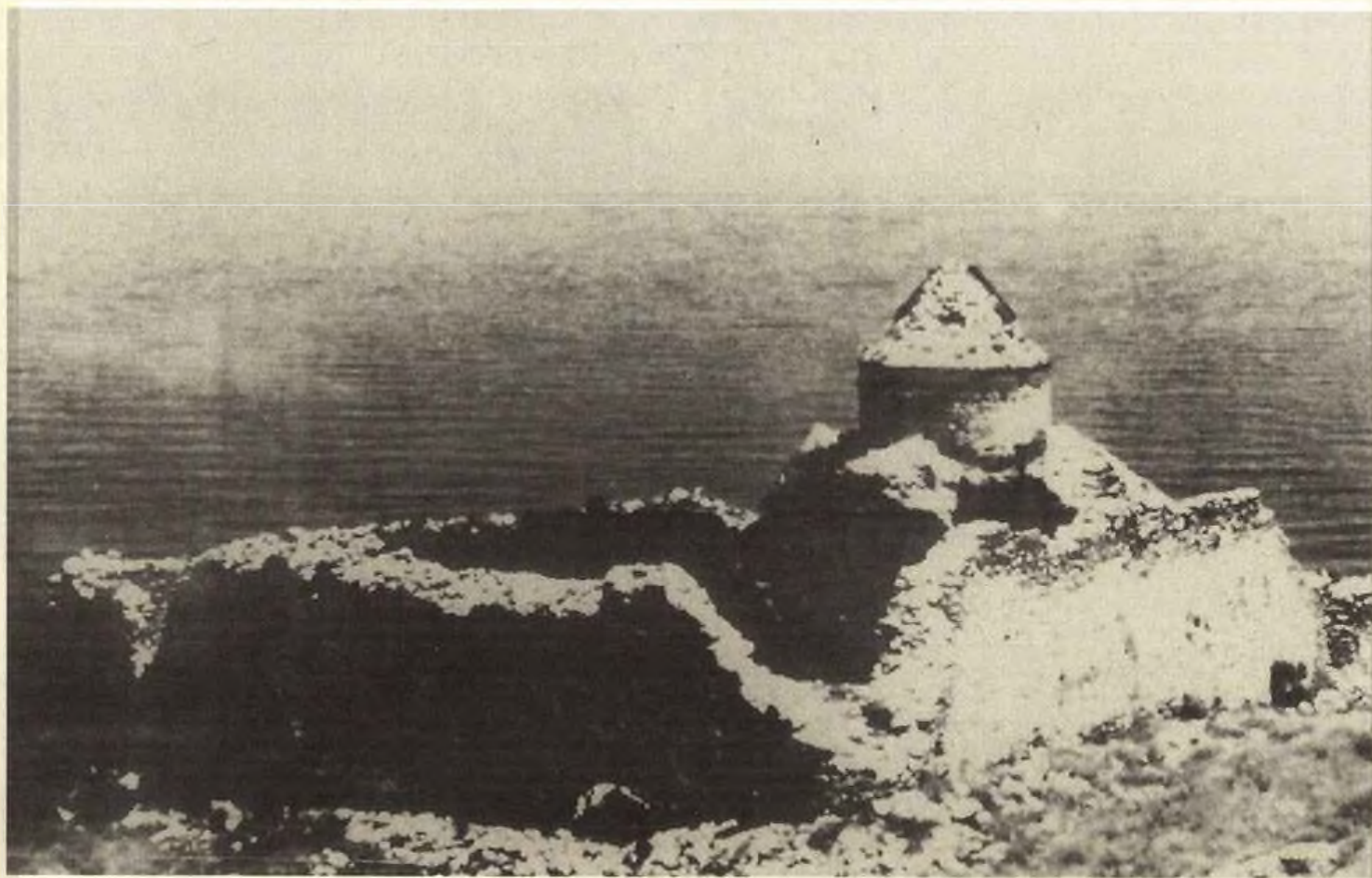
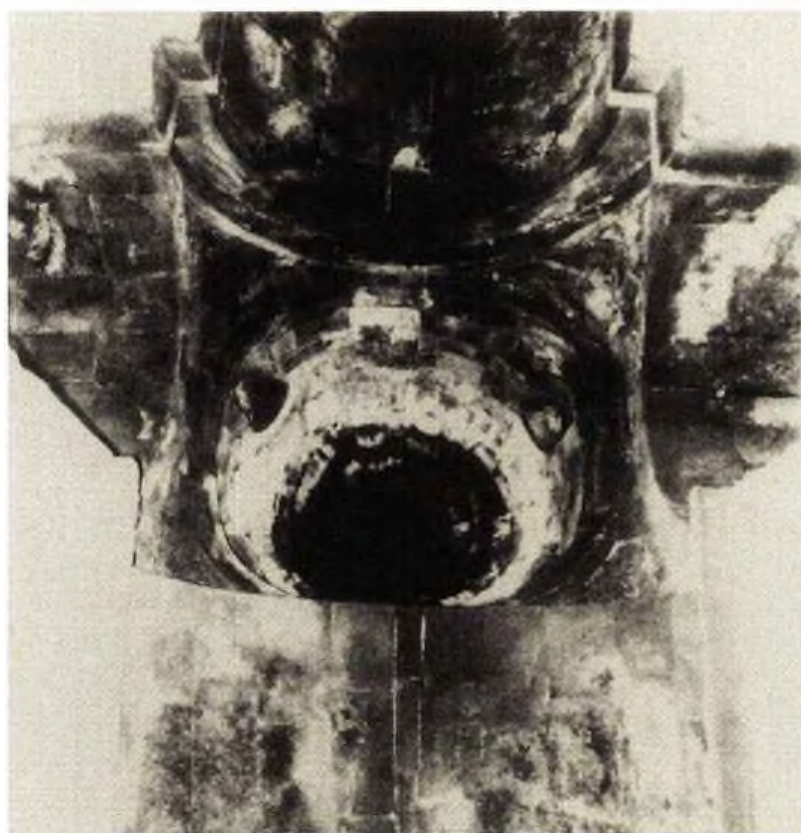


Fig. 14. Surb Gevorg of Goms (Thierry, "Vaspurakan")



Figs. 15-16. Surb Gevorg: Dome and Window (Thierry, "Vaspurakan")



Figs. 17-18. Bitlis: Columnar Fragments
(*Armenian Architecture*: Hakhnazarian and Schöne)



Fig. 19. *Khachkar* at Por (Thierry and Donabédian)

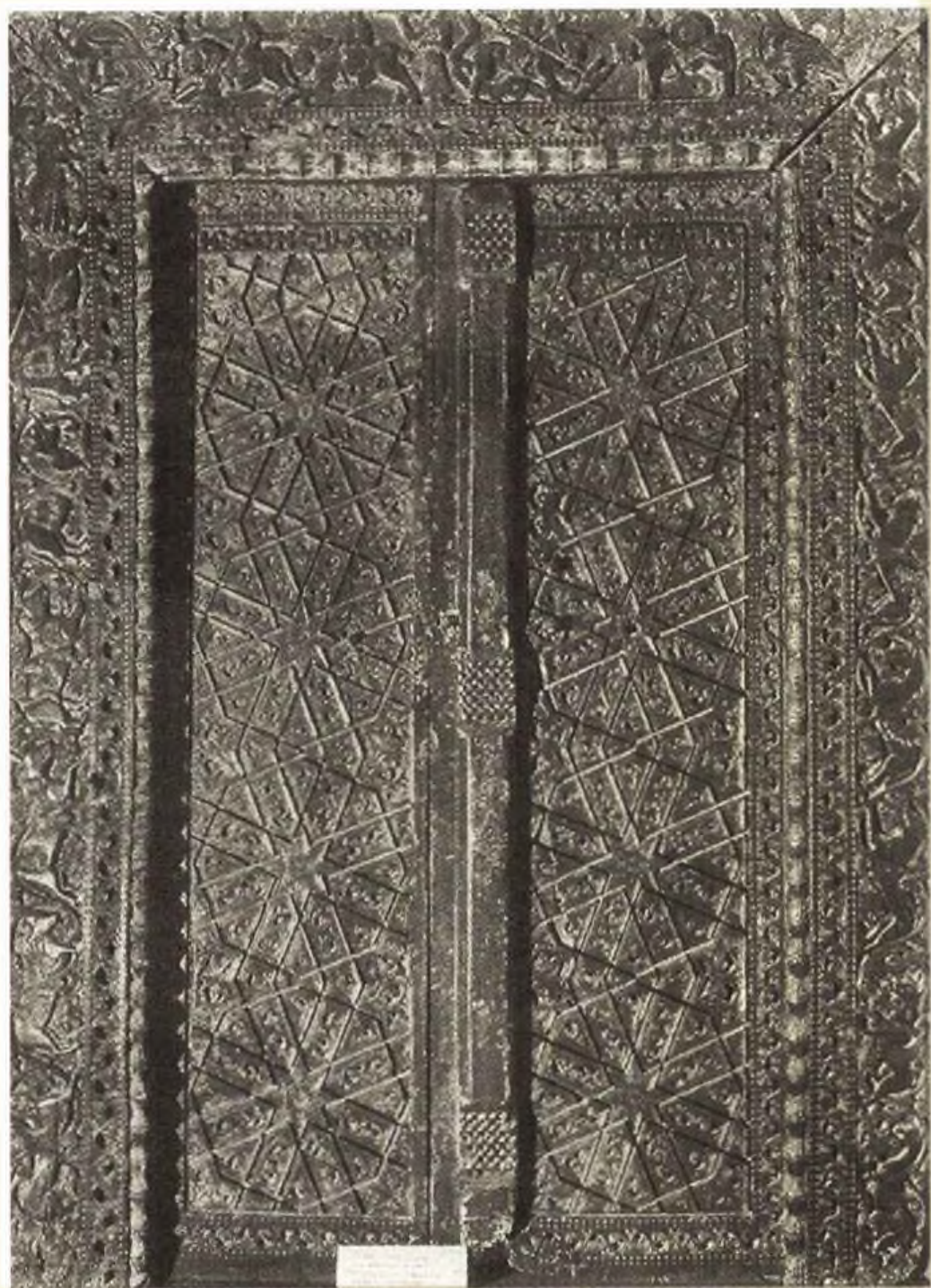


Fig. 20. Wooden Portal of Surb Arakelots (Oskian)



Fig. 21. Gospel of 1038: The Transfiguration (Thierry and Donabédian)



Fig. 22. Battle of Avarayr, 451 A.D. (Kévorkian)

Manuscript Illumination

As with architecture and sculpture, the areas of Taron and Bitlis possessed an active tradition of manuscript illumination. Several monasteries held important scriptoria, notably Surb Arakelots which, as already mentioned, held within its confines the *Mush Homiliarium* (now Matenadaran MS 7729).²⁹ While the codex is not believed to have been produced in the area, the fact of its possession gives an idea of the wealth and importance of the monastery during the middle ages.

The tradition of manuscript illumination in Taron can be dated as early as the eleventh century. The Gospel of 1038 (Matenadaran MS 6201) is thought by Lydia Dournovo to originate in the province of Taron (Fig. 21).³⁰ The full-page images in the manuscript, such as the Baptism of Christ, feature a horizontal format with rhythmic, linear patterning, a bright palette, and elongated, expressive figures. Another illumination, copied in the province of Turuberan in 1316, displays the same characteristics.³¹ While it may perhaps be possible to identify a particular style of manuscripts specifically with the region of Taron/Turuberan, many other manuscript groups from around Lake Van display similar characteristics, which renders the task more difficult. One may certainly note, in any case, that colophons from the eleventh century reveal the names of many scribes and artists in Taron.³²

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artistic activity in Taron is well documented. We know that a certain Hovhannes illuminated a Gospel in 1312, before the manuscript was taken to Cilicia to receive painted portraits (Jerusalem MS 1949).³³

²⁹ Its measurements are 70.5 x 50 centimeters.

³⁰ See Lydia Dournovo, *Armenian Miniatures* (New York: Abrams, 1961), p. 46; Thierry and Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens*, p. 397. Thierry and Donabédian also include the scene of the Transfiguration of Christ.

³¹ See Thierry and Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens*, p. 423, for illustration and citation. The scene depicts Abraham entertaining the angels.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 210; Vrej Nersessian, *Armenian Illuminated Gospel Books* (London: British Library, 1987), p. 25.

³³ See further discussion in Nersessian, *Armenian Illuminated Gospel Books*, p. 25, in which he discusses relations between Cilicia and the region of Taron/Turuberan.

Another artist, Toros Taronatsi or Mshetsi, lived first in Cilicia and then at the Monastery of Gladzor, in southwestern Siunik (Zangezur). At Gladzor, Toros produced his great works, among them the Bible of 1318 and a Gospel of 1323, both of which feature a bright palette and lively depictions of figures and fantastic animals.³⁴

In Bitlis, manuscript activity is best documented in the sixteenth century.³⁵ A manuscript executed there in 1569 illustrates the story of the fifth-century battle of Avarayr, showing the resistance of the Armenian forces against the Sasanian army (Fig. 22).³⁶ The scene, which occurs in a group of late medieval manuscripts,³⁷ generally comprises a two-page format: on the right page, Armenian cavalry led by Vardan Mamikonian, and, on the left, Sasanian armies mounted on elephants. The Bitlis example conforms to the basic iconographical elements of this type, yet it contracts the two-page format into a single, unified scene. The page is filled with movement: in the upper portion, the two mounted forces move against each other, while below, the Armenian horsemen are shown in combat with their enemies, who shoot arrows from their kneeling position. The image is enlivened with a palette of vibrant red, blue, and orange.

Taron and Bitlis were home to monuments of historical and architectural significance, and they cultivated an active manuscript tradition. The sculpture of the region, particularly the wooden portal at the Monastery of Surb Arakelots, is of critical importance to the study of medieval sculpture. As such, the area to the southwest of Van offers a rich field of scholarly exploration which, if undertaken, would certainly broaden and deepen our understanding of medieval Armenian art.

³⁴ For illustrations of the Bible, see Der Nersessian, *L'art arménien*, pp. 220, 221; Dournovo, *Armenian Miniatures*, pp. 149, 151.

³⁵ For the region of Taron, one may also note the manuscript of the Gospel of Terik, near Khnus, executed in 1584. See Thierry and Donabédian, *Les arts arméniens*, p. 441.

³⁶ See Raymond Kévorkian, ed., *L'Arménie entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1996), fig. 97.

³⁷ Note, for example, the Hymnal of 1482 (Erevan, 1620). For a discussion and illustration, see Dournovo, *Armenian Miniatures*, pp. 168-69.